

# Surrogacy: A Bio-economical Exploitation of Proletariats in Amulya Malladi's *A House for Happy Mothers*

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Received: May 16, 2022

Accepted: October 4, 2022

Online Published: October 7, 2022

doi:10.5430/wjel.v12n8p127

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v12n8p127>

## Abstract

Infertility remains a threat to global health issues thus the remedy is global with the medical advancements in technology that enable infertile couples to have babies through surrogacy. Surrogacy is a legal practice of hiring a woman's womb for bearing a child to infertile parents where the intended parents claim full parental rights and the surrogate mothers get the monetary compensation in commercial gestational surrogacy. Surrogates are proletariats from third-world countries struggling to meet day-to-day ends, whilst intended parents are from first-world countries. The existence of poverty and poor economy avail abundant surrogates in third world countries like India attracts infertile couples to flock to these countries thus surrogacy clinics and agents practice exploitative surrogacy (baby) business. This article unveils the exploitation of poor surrogate women and their bodies, with reference to Amulya Malladi's *A House for Happy Mothers* (2016). Further, this study attempts to evaluate surrogacy with the theoretical framework of Marxist Theory of Alienation or Estrangement which condemns the poor surrogates as reproductive machines (labourers) and commercial surrogacy as commodification of wombs.

**Keywords:** baby business, breeding machines, commodification of womb, Marxism, reproductive labor, surrogate mothers

## 1. Introduction

Amulya Malladi has seen India and its poor economy come out of the fact that surrogacy is seen as a new opportunity for the proletariats, whilst intended parents grasp the break as women helping other women thus the exploitative baby business flourish in India. According to the WHO report, one in four women suffers from infertility in developing countries. Globally, there are 48 million couples and 186 million individuals have infertility issues (WHO, 2022). Commercial surrogacy was legalized in India in 2002. Since then, India become a global center for commercial surrogacy with the influx of foreigners and NRIs as intended parents. With advanced medical infrastructure, low costs, and countless surrogates the world of commercial surrogacy is thriving thus Law Commission of India (2009) referred to commercial surrogacy as a 'pot of gold'. Surrogacy is a legal business in countries like the US, still, they are looking for surrogates from India because it costs a quarter of the amount in the US. Thus, infertile parents from all over the world mob Indian surrogacy clinics for low prices, exceptional quality of service, numerous agencies, and a countless number of surrogate mothers which make surrogacy a million-dollar business in India. In 2012, the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) estimated surrogacy as a \$2.3 billion industry, and India is known as the "Surrogacy Capital of the World" (Pushpawati and Singh, 2014).

Global Hunger Index (2021) reports that India ranks 101 out of 116 countries in the world in terms of hunger, which is considered alarming. Money and poverty are the primary motivation behind this successful commercial surrogacy in third-world countries like India. Surrogacy is a boon for couples who are incapable of becoming parents. However, the commodification of women's bodies is quite unethical. There is no socioeconomic equality between surrogate mothers and intended parents. Intended parents are bourgeois and surrogate mothers are from the economically deprived classes (proletariats). Surrogates are poor Indian women and less educated people whose socio-economic circumstances compel them into surrogacy to elevate their families' economical and societal conditions. Surrogacy is not a difficult job for them because they are all working women who are paid less for their job and they find this the best opportunity to earn. The qualitative study of 33 surrogates by (Roze et.al. 2020) in India embraces that surrogacy is discerned as a greasy work to survive in common but surrogates deny the fact that they are not victims or vulnerable rather they are mothers and spouses who utilize this opportunity to uplift socio-economic conditions. As a result, the surrogacy mafia is fueled by a large number of surrogate mothers. "We are taking more concern not only on financial and medical arrangements of surrogacy but also on relational aspects between surrogates and intended parents. Because the parental rights are claimed by the intended parents and the separation of a child from the surrogate affects the psyche of surrogates" (Payne et.al. 2020). Blazier and Janssens (2020) conclude that commercial surrogacy encourages reproduction whereas intended parents empower surrogates. The only issue that should be regulated is payment. And also commercial surrogacy empowers surrogates to decide what they to do with their bodies. Orfali and Chiappari (2014) study reveal that Indian women cannot be autonomous in family decisions and the choice is made by their family members, especially males in their houses. Allowing women into the workforce significantly improves their position. India's Commercial Gestational Surrogacy (ICGS) is a bridge between developing and developed nations. For commissioning parents, parenthood is a way to develop their life journey. The

banning of commissioning surrogates may drive to changing locations or the black market which will be too difficult to regulate (Mendes & Lau, 2018).

## 2. Surrogacy is a Contemporary Issue in a Global Concern

Infertility is a common issue across the globe. Countries approach these issues according to their needs and demands. Some Eastern and European countries have legalized surrogacy and some countries are against the commercialization of surrogacy. India is a country with multitudes of people belonging to the middle class and lower middle class. When the government permits surrogacy, it becomes an international business. Though the poor and the needy are benefitted financially by being surrogates, the government and NGOs look at it as bio-economical exploitation. It is also felt that this is not only an act of commodification of babies but also an act of objectification of women. Hence the enforcement of a rigid law becomes essential.

As long as infertility remains a threat to society, commodification and commercialization will continue to exploit the poorest in society. It is still a topic of controversy across the globe. The latest news is that Indian actress Priyanka Chopra and Nick Jonas welcome their baby via surrogacy. But it is criticized by a section of the society that they have started a family in an unconventional manner of parenthood. A Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin's comments on Twitter seize the attention of many people. She tweets "Surrogacy is possible because there are poor women. Rich people always want the existence of poverty in society for their own interests. If you badly raise a child, adopt a homeless one. Children must inherit your traits- it is just a selfish narcissistic ego.... it is just exploitation of women and poor" (Nasreen, 2022). In the text, Malladi perceives this idea by Madhu who is not interested in the idea of surrogacy as he finds plentiful ways to be happy without a child unlike Priya, who longs for a baby. When Priya expresses her idea of a surrogate mother, Madhu responds "Priya this isn't some handcrafted Indian sari you buy at the fair-trade store. This is a baby. You can't just rent a body" (p. 15). Madhu is ready to adopt a child, but Priya finds surrogacy is the way to have a baby at last. In spite of those failed IVF treatments, she is reluctant to adopt a child as she is adamant to have her biological child. Her social rant does not allow her to bring up someone's child. Childless women are portrayed as unhappy which reinforces the stereotype of women as irrational, emotional and envious individuals which is untrue. A woman can be happy even without her own biological child (Maierhofer, 2019). Sush, Priyasha's mother also objects to this idea of exploiting poor women and utters "my child is exploiting my people... it's an exploitation of the poor and you should be ashamed of yourself" (p. 5). Rekha Sharma, chairperson of the National Commission for Women (NCW) says most people criticize surrogacy without knowing it in detail. She adds "we must not comment on others' choices when we do not know the situation of the people or problem. It is a personal decision of how they want to have their baby. It could be a medical reason or their choice to choose surrogacy" (Mittra, 2022).

Surrogacy is still stigmatized in society even after many celebrities and people like Shah Rukh Khan, Shilpa Shetty, Karan Johar and others welcomed their babies via surrogacy. Dr. Anjana Singh, director and HoD, obstetrics and gynecology at Fortis Noida states that around 25,000 to 30,000 kids are born through surrogacy in India. Further, she adds when people have exhausted all other options they choose surrogacy and it need not be viewed as an oddity India (Mittra, 2022). Arouba Kabir, a mental health counselor answers Taslima Nasrin's questions "How do those mothers feel when they get their readymade babies through surrogacy? Do they have the same feelings for the babies like the mothers who give birth to the babies?" (Mittra, 2022), it is all about the frame of mind. Intended parents can love the babies when the babies grow with them from day one thus they accept them as their own and become responsible parents and so babies because babies' minds are clear slate in which intended parents can fill love and affection. Adding to this Dr. Singh states that once the baby reaches home, the bonding develops automatically and surrogacy brought fulfillment and accomplishment to the intended parents' lives. Dr. Dayal tells surrogacy has been considered immoral in some cultures due to religious beliefs and faiths. India become a hub for foreigners for surrogacy, and this raised ethical concerns about the exploitation and commodification of poor women (Mittra, 2022).

To save poor women from exploitation, the Indian government banned transnational surrogacy and imposed harsh limits on surrogacy by passing the 2016 surrogacy bill. However, these limits open the door to illegal activities such as abducting a child and selling babies. The baby business is still a thriving business in India. It is evident from the latest news dated 13 May 2021, News 18 Buzz that a couple sells their newborn baby for 1.5 lakhs to buy a second-hand car in Uttar Pradesh, India. Another such incident takes place in Andhra Pradesh, India where a couple sells their 12 years old daughter to pay for the medical treatment of their other daughter, and a laborer sells his 3-year-old baby to a childless couple to buy a new mobile phone (Deccan Herald, 2021). Thus, the government's move against surrogacy is much-admired by humanists and social activists. But the poor Indian families find this an opportunity to uplift their socioeconomic conditions. Banning commercial surrogacy will never end the black market.

## 3. Marxist Estrangement

Merriam dictionary defines Marxism as the political, economic and social principles, and policies advocated by Marx. Marx argues we realize human essence through productive activity by division of labor. According to this, commercial surrogacy (infertile parents are capitalists) as exploiters and surrogate mothers (labors) as its victims who are forced into productivity due to their economic compulsions. Thus, surrogates are exploited purely for the benefit of others (infertile parents) rather than for their personal benefits. According to Marx, it is not necessary to estrange all labor from the products. Surrogate laborers are estranged from nature and their products at first. Second, the worker is estranged from herself and the process of production. Third, the worker is estranged from the social aspect of her life and finally, the worker is estranged from other people (Oliver, 1989). According to the Marxist theory of estrangement, a worker is estranged

from herself and the process of production. They do not have control over production and are paid minimum wages. “Surrogate is treated as a machine whose service is exchanged with money” (Oliver, 1989). Marxist alienation is estranging the surrogate mother from the child (product) once they gave birth. In the text, Asha feels that some part of her is taken away when the baby slides out of her womb and the umbilical cord is cut. Asha’s motherhood emotions is no way understood by Dr.Swati who sees this surrogacy as a business for a long and responds “It’s normal to feel sad after giving birth” (p. 297).

According to Marx, there are two distinct differences between general labor and labor of surrogacy. Marx condemns the exploitation of surrogates as reproductive machines, in this way surrogates are doubly estranged. It is represented by Oliver that “we live in a capitalist society where market demands dictate propriety” (Oliver, 1989). Any labor cannot do 24 hours jobs unless they are slaves. Laborers work 8 hours a day whereas surrogacy laborers work 24 hours a day for 10 months and they are never off duty (Oliver, 1989). In the text, Asha is estranged from her husband when Dr.Swati advises them not to have sex before three months and during pregnancy, and she is estranged from her family and children by moving to the surrogacy clinic four months before her due. Sometimes surrogates have to move to surrogacy clinics earlier than planned if the doctor or intended parents feel that being in that poor ambience is not good enough for the baby in the womb. The baby in the womb is considered more than the surrogates’ own children in their home. Asha separates from her own children for the baby in her womb and she is merely considered a reproductive machine. Asha has to give up her own family to save the child which doesn’t belong to her own. Once after the delivery, the baby is taken away by the intended parents and surrogates do not get any rights over the product (baby), instead, they are paid with some money. While renting the womb, they are expected to discard their human emotions and it is perceptible when Priya utters she misses her kids “but our baby needs to be safe, and it isn’t for the rest of her life, just a few months” (p. 133).

In *A House for Happy Mother* Malladi unravels the Marxist theory of division of labor through Priyasha and Madhu an infertile couple from the United States as capitalists who hire a surrogate labor Asha from a village in Hyderabad in India. Medical advancements in reproductive technology offer plentiful ways for capitalists to achieve their desires in artificial ways whereas the proletariats remain barren if they are not conceived naturally. Priya, a well-to-do from the US finds that surrogacy is the only way to get a baby after three miscarriages and three failed IVF treatments. Dr.Swati Gudla, the owner of the surrogacy clinic, Happy Mothers House offers choices to the couple to choose the surrogates as their own and they find Asha is the right choice to carry their babies. Compared with the other two women who have been surrogates earlier Asha is a young woman of twenty-five with two children and the surrogate for the first time. It shows how surrogates are looked upon as breeding machines to deliver a healthy baby. Intended couples do not have concern for them as human beings rather try to satisfy them with materials. When Priya sends a gift box for Asha, the whole family opens it with excitement that a typical middle-class Indian family thing. Kaveri and Putamma open the box and wonder about the texture of the cloth they send for Asha’s children and a watch for Pratap. “Were they trying to buy her good behavior by sending her presents? Or were they genuinely just saying thank you?” (p. 91).

#### 4. Womb Mothers with No Autonomy

Marxism condemns the act of surrogacy which exploits poor women as reproductive laborers by wealthy couples. In the world of materialism, everything can be compensated with the money thus motherhood is not an exception. Surrogates are deprived physically, emotionally, and economically due to their poor economy. Women in a country like India have no autonomy as they have gender and social constraints that restrict them. Surrogate women do not have any autonomy to decide individually, rather they are forced to make decisions by their family members and society. Malladi incorporates the idea by situating surrogate mothers in the *House for Happy Mothers*. They are from poor Indian families who forcibly turn into surrogates to upward their families which paves way for capitalists to exploit the proletariats. All the surrogate mothers in the Happy Mothers House are forced to choose surrogacy as their job, which pays better than their previous jobs. The text validates this through Putamma’s words “It’s for a good cause, and it’s better than selling a kidney, isn’t it?” (p. 25). Kaveri, Asha’s sister-in-law has paid five lakhs for giving birth to a British couple through they buy a new flat and she is ready to do it the next time for her children’s education.

In India, surrogacy is associated with illicit extra-marital relationships thus surrogates prefer to stay away from their family and children during pregnancy to preserve the reputation of their family and husband (Rochebrochad et al. 2020). Malladi presents this societal stigma of surrogacy through Asha, who utters “No one in her village would ever approve this. Decent women didn’t use their bodies to make money” (p. 22). Thus women in the novels stealthily carry someone’s baby in their wombs and keep it a dirty secret. She is unable to voice her decision of unwillingness to rent her womb for money because she is a woman from India who doesn’t raise her voice against her husband and family, and men in the family and elders are the deciding authority. Her husband Pratap and her mother-in-law find this a great opportunity to have some handsome money and force her to do because as a painter Pratap cannot support his son’s education “all he saw were rupees in the bank” (p. 25). “Could she have said no? Could she have been selfish and said, “No, this is my body, I decide?” (p. 21). She is a woman without voicing her choice even on her own body. Finally, she decides to sell her womb the only asset she possesses to supplement her family and her son’s education thus she becomes the victim in the hands of the exploitative surrogacy business. This validates the statements of Orfali and Chiappari (2014) that Indian women cannot be autonomous in family decisions and the choice is made by their family members, especially males in their houses.

Having Indian background Malladi exhibits the cruelty of the Indian dowry system in marriage through some other surrogates Gangamma, Keertana and Ragini. This cruel system forces Keertana to do for a possible number of times because she is in need of money for her daughter’s marriage. She says, “A woman in this country is already nobody; now take a poor woman, someone like us... we’re less than

nobody. A dog in the slum has more rights than we do” (p. 164). Charu, the other surrogate is cheated on by her husband. He takes the money she earned recently through surrogacy and leaves her alone. So, she is doing this for the second time to save herself and her children. Ragini is doing it for the third time. Her husband is an alcoholic and beats her regularly, so she saves money for her daughters’ dowries through surrogacy. No one is doing this out of their desire, they are all from the poor class who are doing this as a well-paid job which turns them into labor. Poverty and money are the primary motivation behind all these women. Malladi presents this idea through one of the surrogates’ words “No one comes from a good family... we all come from nothing... If they had any money, they wouldn’t do this” (p. 162).

The surrogates do not have any authority over the money they earn through surrogacy rather their family and husband sometimes the society decide what to do with the money they earn by renting the womb. This is consistent with Sharmila Rudrappa's (2017) assertion that surrogacy is used to guarantee a future rather than meet immediate fundamental necessities. However, the study reveals that surrogate independence is a fiction fostered by patriarchal society (Rudrappa, 2017). In the text, Asha earns the money “with sweat and blood and pain and nausea” (p. 66). But her husband discusses buying a flat with the money with his brother. She has no autonomy to say “It’s my womb, so it’s my money” (p. 27). In the surrogacy clinics, surrogates do not have any choice on their own and are under surveillance 24 hours and have restrictions on their food and dos and don’ts after they are all experienced with pregnancy and delivery. Thus Malladi clearly portrays the women in the novels become surrogates by chance not by choice. They do not have any individual choice even on their own body and earnings.

### 5. Baby Business

Marx regards capitalists as exploiters and workers as their victims (Bakshi, 2011). Dr.Swati Godla echoes the exploitative surrogacy business where they see women as mere wombs. Amulya Malladi spotlights how the doctors (exploiters) of surrogacy clinics exploit the poor women (victims) through the incident when the television crew from England comes to Happy Mothers House for an interview to make a documentary film on surrogates and surrogacy in India, Dr. Swati chooses the surrogates for the interview. If she has treated them well and is doing ethical business, why should she choose the person for the interview? Gangamma, Vinitha, and Asha, who are quiet and polite among other women in the house are selected by her for the interview. She manipulates the poor women with her knowledge that this kind of interview is a big opportunity for Happy Mothers House and the poor women like them and she says if more couples come, she can help women like them more. When Asha hesitates to participate in the interview and worries about her identity, Dr.Swati manipulates her mind by saying that she can hide her face and thus her identity will not be revealed. She will help her son to get into a special school with the local MP’s recommendation if she participates in the interview. Hence Asha sells her womb to get money at first, now she has to sell her honesty to get Manoj into a good school.

Revathi, the mother (caretaker of surrogates) in the Happy Mothers House says, “The rich get richer and the poor stay poorer” (p. 227). When Asha expresses that helping the infertile parents with a baby is a good thing, Revathi admonishes “Good thing for whom? (p. 227). The intended parents from developed countries get a baby but women from third world countries only get a sagging stomach and some money which helps to live a better life not enough like a bourgeois. The surrogacy clinics get more than for surrogates’ work. Then, Asha feels “we’re like coolies, carrying someone else’s load for a while” (p. 228). When Priya feels insecure about carrying Madhu’s baby with some other women she says “Asha was a surrogate baby maker, not a surrogate wife” (p. 34) and they get a paycheck baby and no way connected with the surrogate mother. India was the top destination for surrogacy. In developing countries like India, people are striving in poverty. Sush remarks that Happy Mothers House is not really a happy house. “It’s like a baby factory... I know, it’s better than slums. That’s India...” (p. 259). Then Priya understands her mother’s words that surrogacy is an exploitation of poor people. After knowing all these she keeps quiet. She is helping Manoj’s scholarship and poor people like Asha never have a chance to get a good education if she denies helping them. Sush remarks Priyasha has a good heart and helps poor people. “But you’re helping the boy to assuage your guilt... it’s not exactly selfless act... she was using Asha, but she was also giving back. Were the scales even now?” (p. 283).

Amulya Malladi, having been born and brought up in the Indian cultural and religious background, can comprehend the issues of women. She is capable of dealing with the sense and sensibilities of both the couple who need a baby and a surrogate. A financially sound Indian immigrant couple in the United States, despite their acculturation in the settled land, decides to beget a child as their Indian self urges them to own a child. Another notable opinion brought forth by Mrs. Malladi is that fertility treatment in any other foreign country is costly when compared to the begetting of a child out of surrogacy in India. In the text, Priyasha spends 3000 dollars on her IVF treatment in the United States. All her efforts and the sequential treatment end in failure. Her effort to have a baby through surrogacy is not only successful but also less expensive comparing her treatment cost. Therefore it is natural for any aspirants to turn to India for such treatments and surrogacy. Malladi artistically and diligently represents the startling reality of the Indian surrogate mothers and the sensibilities of the aspiring infertile couples in the novel *A House for Happy Mothers* under the veiling politics of survival.

Surrogacy business is legal and the clinics have an affidavit printed in English which cannot be understood by the uneducated surrogate mothers. Surrogates are paid only after they deliver a healthy baby, in case of bad situations something happens to the baby the surrogacy clinics neglect to pay the money for surrogates as it is all a nature which cannot be claimed by the surrogate legally because the surrogacy clinic has legal documents that support most of the cases. It is evident from the latest news, Preeti a 24-year-old woman and a mother of two from Tamilnadu, files a complaint against the private fertility clinics that she was cheated to pay five lakhs after she delivered twins. She decided to rent her womb to make ends meet through the staff from the clinic, and the hospital offered 4 lakhs for a male child and 5 lakhs for twins. She delivered premature twins and the hospital gave her only Rs.10,000 by telling her that the babies had died.

## 6. Conclusion

Surrogacy is a kind of survival strategy for the poor women who need money which opens the door to exploitation by the medical practitioners and intended parents. Malladi portrays this state of affairs in her novel through the intended parents and surrogacy houses who exploit the poor surrogates. Still, the protagonist and the surrogates are driven to use surrogacy as an opportunity to fulfill their dreams and uplift their families. To save poor women from exploitation, Indian government banned transnational surrogacy and imposed harsh limits on surrogacy bypassing the 2016 surrogacy bill. However, these limits open the door to illegal activities such as abducting a child and selling babies. Strict implementation of these laws make the poor surrogate mothers feel that they are denied a decent income and the intended parents also miss the opportunity to get biological children.

From a commoner's point of view, surrogacy is still a matter of legal complication which does not allow them to move a step forward to beget a child. India has been a country known for its joint family system. A couple cannot be happy in this system without a baby of their own as their own kith and kin frequently empathize with them for not having a child. Nevertheless, they cannot move away from this familial set up which again questions their future, especially in their old age. After a prolonged wait, the couple has to decide to bring up a child or beget one by surrogacy. Adopting a child is again a complicated legal process in the Indian adoption act. Religion and cast play a crucial role in picking up the right child from an orphanage. A couple belonging to one religion cannot decide to take up a child from another religion. Even the law is against such violations. A study entitled *Surrogacy: Ethical and Legal Issues* concludes that "The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956 does not permit non-Hindus to adopt a Hindu child..." Such intricacies disable the couple to go for adoption though there are hundreds of orphanages and thousands of orphaned children and make them venture into the concept of surrogacy. The governments both state and central should bring out a comprehensive surrogacy law that could be accessible to all the citizens of the country. This will help the needy to fulfill their basic needs of having a child of their own.

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